

SENATE JOINT RESOLUTION 579

By Graves

A RESOLUTION to honor the memory of Mr. Jerry W. Thompson.

WHEREAS, it was with great sadness and a profound sense of loss that the members of this General Assembly learned of the untimely passing of Mr. Jerry Thompson; and

WHEREAS, Mr. Thompson was an outstanding writer, columnist, and journalist, who carried out his professional duties with extraordinary skill, giving unselfishly of himself, his time, and his talents for the greater good of his family, friends, and the Middle Tennessee area; and

WHEREAS, Jerry Thompson was an exemplary public servant and consummate professional who worked assiduously to improve the quality of life for his fellow citizens in numerous capacities; and

WHEREAS, throughout his remarkable life, Mr. Thompson performed his reporting duties with professionalism and fairness; his dedication to the journalism profession should serve as a benchmark for other journalists to emulate; and

WHEREAS, a lifetime resident of Robertson County, Jerry Thompson was the quintessential "pillar of the community" and a voice of integrity in the Coopertown community; his sense of humor, indomitable spirit, and steadfast principles endeared him to many Tennesseans; and

WHEREAS, Mr. Thompson served with jocular and home-spun class as an award-winning reporter at *The Tennessean*, a position in which he earned the respect of his readers and peers for the superior quality of his work; and

WHEREAS, Mr. Thompson was one of Tennessee's most distinguished and best-loved journalists; he was the eloquent writer of the highly popular "Thompson's Station" column in *The Tennessean*; and

WHEREAS, perhaps his most important and significant work was when Jerry unselfishly put aside his own personal safety and concerns to go undercover and infiltrate the notorious Ku Klux Klan; and

WHEREAS, cut off from his family and friends for nearly one-and-one-half years, Jerry Thompson assumed a new identity and moved to Birmingham, Alabama, where he was ceremoniously initiated into two rival Klan groups—David Duke's Knights of the Ku Klux Klan and Bill Wilkinson's Invisible Empire; and

WHEREAS, vowing to uphold the Klan and to protect its secrets, Jerry marched in demonstrations, carried signs with racist statements on them, participated in cross-burnings, and attended Klan meetings during his risky infiltration of the racial hate group; and

WHEREAS, Mr. Thompson came out of the harrowing ordeal physically unscathed and wrote an exposé on the Ku Klux Klan that earned him a national Headliner Award and a Pulitzer Prize nomination; he also wrote a widely-read book, *My Life in the Klan*, detailing his undercover experience; and

WHEREAS, shortly after his undercover stint as a Klansman, Jerry Thompson re-wrote history when he uncovered a story about one of the most famous murders in the United States; and

WHEREAS, in 1913, Leo Frank was convicted and sentenced to death for the murder of 14-year-old Mary Phagan in Atlanta; however, appeals delayed Mr. Frank's execution and his sentence was changed to life imprisonment. Upon hearing this news, an angry crowd stormed the prison where Leo Frank was being held, kidnapped him at gunpoint, and lynched him; and

WHEREAS, 80 years later, Mr. Thompson followed up on a lead given to him and conversed with the only eyewitness to Mary Phagan's murder; as a result of his excellent reporting and people skills, the witness, Alonzo Mann, was finally able to come forward with his information and clear the name of Leo Frank; and

WHEREAS, the resulting story set straight the historical record of the Phagan murder case, inspired a made-for-TV movie and the writing of several books about the case, and earned Jerry Thompson another National Headliner Award; and

WHEREAS, a truly humble man, Mr. Thompson shrugged off many of the awards he won during his illustrious career, but he always beamed with pride over the award he received in April of 1991 from the National Conference of Christian and Jews; the organization commended Jerry's notable works by presenting him with the first Human Relations Communicator Award, which recognizes the media's role in fostering human relations and dispelling racial, ethnic, and religious stereotypes; and

WHEREAS, although he always took his reporting seriously, Jerry was renowned for getting people to laugh at themselves with his contagious sense of humor and practical jokes. No one was immune from Jerry's razor-sharp wit as he "initiated" cub reporters, such as Vice-President Al Gore, and taught life lessons to his colleagues with his hilarious practical jokes; and

WHEREAS, Jerry Thompson was an extremely giving and patient person who motivated everyone around him to reach their full potential; he was an endless source of inspiration to those who knew and cherished him and was tremendously admired by his colleagues and superiors alike; and

WHEREAS, endeavoring to love the Lord, Jerry Thompson was an active and devout member of the Martin's Chapel Methodist Church, where he faithfully carried out the Lord's will for many years; and

WHEREAS, Jerry Thompson was also deeply devoted to his family, and he always endeavored to remain true to family values of the highest order; and

WHEREAS, Mr. Thompson was most appreciative of the loving companionship and unparalleled devotion he received from his wife, the former Linda Latta, who was the recipient of the Caregiver of the Year Award presented by *Coping* magazine for her selfless caregiving efforts during Jerry's 11-year battle with cancer; and

WHEREAS, Jerry Thompson was the proud father of three sons, Todd, Joe, and Matt, all of Springfield; three stepdaughters, Niki Stewart and Tanya McCaskill, both of Springfield, and Debbie Lemay of White House; and a stepson, Tony Thompson of White House; and

WHEREAS, he is also survived by two brothers, Ronnie and Dickie Thompson of Springfield; two sisters, Kaye Mitchell of Madison and Faye Partee O'Conner of Springfield; a grandson; and six step-grandchildren; and

WHEREAS, Jerry Thompson leaves behind an indelible legacy of integrity and probity in public life, compassion and loyalty in private life, and diligence and dedication in all his chosen endeavors; and

WHEREAS, he will be fondly remembered and greatly treasured by everyone who was fortunate enough to have made his acquaintance; and

WHEREAS, Mr. Jerry Thompson is one of those sterling individuals that has blessed Tennessee throughout its illustrious history and who, through their hard work, expertise, and dedication, have pieced together the enduring fabrics that comprise the grand tapestry of the United States of America; and

WHEREAS, it is fitting that this General Assembly should pause to remember the bountiful life of this exceptional public servant and human being; now, therefore,

BE IT RESOLVED BY THE SENATE OF THE ONE HUNDRED FIRST GENERAL ASSEMBLY OF THE STATE OF TENNESSEE, THE HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES CONCURRING, That we honor the memory of Mr. Jerry Thompson, reflecting fondly upon his impeccable character, his outstanding contributions to this state, and his stalwart commitment to living the examined life with courage and conviction.

BE IT FURTHER RESOLVED, That we express our sympathy and offer our condolences to the entire Thompson family and Jerry's many friends and admirers.

BE IT FURTHER RESOLVED, That an appropriate copy of this resolution be prepared for presentation with this final clause omitted from such copy.